



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 110th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

WASHINGTON, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 21, 2007

House of Representatives

VETERANS' COMPENSATION COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENT ACT OF 2007

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself as much time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, we all urge passage of H.R. 1284, the so-called Veterans' Compensation, COLA, Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act. It would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to increase, effective December 1 of this year, the rates of veterans' compensation to keep pace with the rising cost of living in our Nation. The rate adjustment is equal to that provided on an annual basis to Social Security recipients and is based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index.

Regardless, Mr. Speaker, of where any of us are on the current war in Iraq, we all believe that our returning young men and women who have served this Nation so courageously get all the attention, care, respect and love that we can give as a Nation. Nothing bothers any of us more than to see returning troops, whether it be at Walter

Reed or any of our VA hospitals, have to face the bureaucracy that seems indifferent, and does not provide the services they need.

The cost of serving these veterans, which includes this annual COLA, is a continuing cost of war. We will have from Iraq and Afghanistan an increase in injuries and disabilities that will yield an increase in claims for compensation. Over 1.5 million servicemembers have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan without any end, it looks like, in sight, and the President calls for more troops. Therefore, the Veterans Administration, as well as the military hospitals, can expect a significant increase in the number of new claims for compensation and new demands on the health care system. I think that recent events have shown that neither system is adequately prepared for that onslaught, and, in fact, the systems are stretched to the breaking point.

We as a Congress, we as a Nation, have got to give our veterans all the care that they need, all the resources they need, and we as Congress have to provide accountability for the spending of those resources.

Let me say that certainly we on the Democratic side, and I am sure supported on the Republican side, have made major increases in the resources to our veterans care that is now demanded from our Nation. I am told that the budget resolution will have an additional \$6.6 billion over what we appropriated last year for the Veterans Administration.

You know that we appropriated an additional \$3.6 billion for fiscal year 2007, the year that we are in now, in the so-called continuing resolution, the biggest increase of any department in that continuing resolution.

The supplemental that we will be considering at the end of this week has \$3.5 billion for military and veterans health care: we say if you are going to deal with the cost of war, deal with the costs of the warrior.

So just in 60 days, Mr. Speaker, the new majority in the Congress has provided an additional \$13.5 billion for the care of our Nation's veterans, and that is a bigger increase than was totaled in the last 5 years combined.

So I think we are responding to the Walter Reed scandal. We are responding to the tragic suicides that came from indifference from the bureaucracy. We are responding to the needs of traumatic brain injury that have so increased in this war. We are responding to the needs of those who have post-traumatic stress disorder. We are responding to the needs of a Veterans Administration that is backlogged 600,000 disability claims.

So we are going to respond with the dollars. We also need to make sure we have accountability, and we will have more to say on that in the future.

Congress regularly enacts an annual cost-of-living adjustment for veterans compensation to make sure that inflation does not erode the purchasing power of veterans and their families who depend upon this income to meet their daily needs. This bill before us, in fact, will benefit all veterans from the World War I era through the current conflicts.

So I hope that we will have support for this. I would like to add my thanks for the increases that I talked about just a second ago in this budget for 2008 and the continuing resolution for 2007 and the supplemental that we will be considering to our Speaker, *Nancy Pelosi*, who insisted that we care for our Nation's veterans; also, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Mr. *Obey* of Wisconsin; to his chairman of the subcommittee that looks at veterans affairs, Mr. *Edwards* from Texas; and the chairman of our Budget Committee, Mr. *Spratt*, all of whom said we are not going to fail this test that America is faced with today, the test of whether we are going to make sure that our veterans get the care they need

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

I would like to yield just a minute for a question to the chairman, if he might. By your comments, am I to take it that the majority does now have the votes necessary to pass the supplemental later this week?

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. MILLER of Florida. I yield to the gentleman from California.

Mr. FILNER. You are asking that of me? The lowest level of person in the House? No, I hope we will take up that supplemental at the end of the week.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. I thank the chairman.

I do rise in strong support also of this piece of legislation, thanking my colleagues, the new chairman of the subcommittee which I chaired last year, Mr. *Hall*, and also Mr. *Lamborn*, the new ranking member; also, again, thanking Chairman *Filner* and Ranking Member *Buyer* for helping move this important legislation to the floor as quickly as it has.

In this piece of legislation we increased, effective as of December 1 of this year, the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities, the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans. Also, the COLA adjustment includes wartime disability compensation, additional compensation for dependents, clothing allowance, dependency and indemnity compensation to a surviving spouse, dependency and indemnity compensation for children.

Mr. Speaker, this is an important annual authorization bill which provides much-needed assistance to our Nation's veterans. I encourage and expect all of my colleagues to support this piece of legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield as much time as he may consume to the new chairman of the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee of the Veterans Affairs Committee, Mr. *Hall* of New York.

Mr. HALL of New York. Thank you, Congressman, for yielding to me.

Mr. Speaker, I introduced H.R. 1284 earlier this month with the Chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Congressman *Filner*.

Chairman *Filner* has been instrumental in moving this bill forward. I thank him for that. I also want to thank the ranking member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Steve Buyer*, and our ranking member of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs,

Doug Lamborn, who were both helpful in getting this bill moved expeditiously. The fact that we got this bill to the floor within the month shows the House leadership's commitment to our Nation's veterans.

As chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, I believe that America must uphold its promise to care for our veterans and their families, and I strongly support efforts to alleviate unjust financial burdens imposed upon our Nation's veterans and their survivors. This is why I am so pleased that H.R. 1284 is on the floor today.

H.R. 1284 would provide a cost-of-living adjustment to the rates of disability compensation provided to our Nation's disabled veterans and to the compensation provided to the survivors of veterans and servicemembers who died or who will die as a result of military service.

Every year since 1976, Congress has enacted an annual COLA adjustment for veterans with disabilities and their survivors. The regularity of Congress' action on COLA legislation underscores its importance. Without it, inflation would diminish and erode the purchasing power of millions of beneficiaries. According to VA, as set forth in its fiscal year 2008 budget, the Department estimates that it will provide disability compensation to 3,220,031 veterans with service-related disabilities in fiscal year 2008.

In summary, this legislation is critical to the lives of over 3 million beneficiaries who have served our country well and faithfully. I ask for your continued support for our Nation's veterans, and I ask for your support of the bipartisan Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living-Adjustment Act of 2007.

I would just like to say a few words also about another bill that is on the floor today and falls under the jurisdiction of my subcommittee, H.R. 797, the Dr. James Allen Veteran Vision Equity Act. As with H.R. 1284, I am proud of the speed

and fashion in which this bill has come to the floor.

H.R. 797, which has the backing of the Blind Veterans Association, would put the Veterans Administration on a par with the Social Security Administration, the World Health Organization, and all 50 States in defining a visual impairment.

Furthermore, this bill allows certain veterans to receive a "V" on their gravestone and reauthorizes the VA's popular work/study program.

Mr. Speaker, this Congress faces a substantial task in dealing with the difficulties our veterans face. Currently there are more than 570,000 veterans claims pending before the VA, literally hundreds of thousands of veterans waiting on decisions that can substantially affect their financial situation.

On top of this, we have a new generation of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The subcommittee I chair, the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, recently held a hearing where we heard from experts and Iraq war veterans. They all agree that the VA is critically unprepared to deal with these new commitments and will be overwhelmed.

One witness privately compared the VA's current position to that of a person standing on a beach while a tsunami comes rushing towards the shore. These men and women deserve our support, and it is incumbent upon this Congress to act.

In the coming month, I plan to hold hearings on several pieces of legislation that will address this backlog. I have introduced one bill which would provide interim benefits to veterans who have waited over 6 months for a decision on their appeal.

While this will not fix the entire problem, it will help veterans pay their bills and buy their medicine while they wait for a decision from the VA. I look forward to working with colleagues

on both sides of the aisle on these important issues, and I trust they share my sense of urgency on these matters.

It is my hope that H.R. 797 and H.R. 1284 are the first of many steps this Congress takes to ensure that those who have sacrificed so much for this country receive the benefits they have earned.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure now to yield 4 minutes to the gentleman from Washington, who although not on the VA Committee, is an active participant in much of the legislation that comes to that committee, and an Air Force veteran, Mr. *Reichert*.

Mr. REICHERT. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

Mr. Speaker, we are here to, and I am honored to be here to support H.R. 1284, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007. It sounds awful cold and mechanical when you rattle it off in that way, but it means a lot to the people who serve this country.

I was, as my good friend Mr. *Miller* said, I was in the Air Force. I served 33 years in the King County Sheriff's Office in Seattle, Washington, and I had friends who were wounded in the line of duty, partners who were wounded, partners who were killed and sacrificed their lives to protect their communities. I, myself, was nearly mortally wounded in serving our community as a sheriff's deputy.

I know what it means to have a community come behind you. I know what it means to have a family stand with you. I know what it means to have your friends, your relatives, and your local government to be there with you.

Our veterans deserve to know what that feeling is. They need to know the United States Government and Members of Congress are standing with them. We are soldiers here fighting with them, providing them with the benefits they need, the tools they need, the things they need to do their job, the things they need to do to protect

their families, the things they need to have to provide for their families.

Two weeks ago I stopped and visited a marine in a Seattle VA hospital. This marine was wounded in the neck with a .22 caliber bullet. I stood in awe at his courage as he lay paralyzed from the waist down, and I asked him what his plans were for the future, and that I was honored to meet him, and sorry that he was wounded in battle.

He looked at me and smiled and said, Why feel sorry for me? Don't. I volunteered for this work. I want to protect America. You know what he said his plans for the future was? To go back to Iraq. He said, I will walk again and fight next to my brothers and sisters on the front lines.

I met another soldier at Madigan Hospital, the Army hospital in Tacoma, Washington, a soldier who was standing near someone who blew themselves up, a suicide bomber. He is now suffering from a blood viral infection. He has been treated for over a year at Madigan Hospital. I said the same thing to him. I am honored to meet you. What are your plans for the future?

He said, I will heal. Don't feel sorry for me. I am going back to fight with my fellow soldiers.

This cost-of-living increase seems mechanical to us as we sit here in this House floor. It means a lot to the soldiers that are fighting and dying for this freedom of our citizens, of all of us here today.

I am so proud to be here to stand before you and support this legislation.

One of the other things that we must do, not only pass legislation that helps them provide for their families and for themselves and their future, you must reach out and make sure that those veterans who are out in our community, 624,000 veterans in the State of Washington, know what benefits are available to them.

On March 31, we would hold a veterans fair just across the water from Seattle, Washington, and

invite every veteran in the State to be there so they can learn how we can help them and we can honor them.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield as much time as she may consume to the gentlewoman from Nevada (Ms. *Berkley*).

Ms. BERKLEY. Mr. Speaker, I also would like to thank Chairman *Filner*, Ranking Member *Buyer*, and subcommittee chairman, *John Hall*, and ranking subcommittee chairman, Mr. *Miller*, for their continued efforts to ensure the value of veterans benefits does not erode as the cost living increases.

H.R. 1284, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act, will help our service-disabled veterans and their survivors maintain the purchasing power of their benefits in 2008.

Now, everyone that has spoken before me has been quite eloquent, and you don't need for me to reinforce all of the statements that they have already made. But I would like to let you know how this affects the people that I represent.

Last year, over 31,000 veterans and survivors received disability compensation or pension payments from the VA in the State of Nevada. The action we are taking here today will help the Nevada veterans and families who depend on these VA benefits. No amount of money can adequately compensate our veterans for the loss of their health, or families for the loss of a loved one. It is important, though, that these benefits do not lose their value over time, and that we demonstrate our genuine appreciation for the sacrifices they have made on behalf of our Nation.

Mr. Speaker, I ask that everybody vote in favor of this measure.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I yield 2 minutes to the gentleman from Pennsylvania (Mr. *Dent*).

Mr. DENT. Thank you, Congressman *Miller*, for your leadership, as well as Congresswoman *Berkley*. I appreciate all of your leadership on this very important issue.

Mr. Speaker, I too rise today to speak in favor of H.R. 1284, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007.

I think we all are indeed grateful for the services of our Nation's veterans. They have answered this country's call time and time again. As a matter of fact, just last week I visited a VA outpatient clinic in my own district of Allentown, Pennsylvania. I continue to be amazed by the spirit of our veterans. Many of whom I met with there were in the Vietnam War, and some of whom were still struggling with the issues that affected them since their return. But I am nevertheless amazed by their spirit.

I also recently visited the Walter Reed Army Hospital in the wake of events. But as a Nation, we are indebted to these veterans. We are indebted to them for their contributions to our freedom. We need to take every opportunity to let those veterans know that they are appreciated and that their needs will be met by a grateful government and a grateful Nation.

H.R. 1284 is an opportunity for us to help meet those needs. This bill provides for an increase in the rate of compensation for disabled veterans and in the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for their families effective December 1.

The percentage increase in these rates would be equal to the increase for Social Security benefits, which would be calculated later this year. Veterans benefits must keep up with inflation. Veterans should not have to worry about losing their standard of living just because they may be living on a fixed income.

This bill will help to accomplish that particular objective. I strongly urge the Members of this House to show their support for America's veterans by voting in favor of the Veterans'

Compensation Cost-of-Living and Adjustment Act of 2007.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I have no further speakers, but I would like to thank Mr. *Miller* for his commitment to our Nation's veterans, for leading his side with civility, cooperation and friendship.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Mr. Speaker, veterans with service-related disabilities deserve not only our admiration, but also our support. This is why today I rise in strong support of H.R. 327, H.R. 797 and H.R. 1284, a series of bills assisting our service men and women.

H.R. 327, The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act will require the Veterans' Affairs Department to develop and implement a comprehensive program to reduce the incidence of suicide among veterans. Last year a survey study conducted among Army and Marine combat units returning from Iraq and Afghanistan found that one in eight troops reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, less than half of these soldiers experiencing symptoms sought professional help, primarily out of fear of being stigmatized by peers or hurting their military careers. With PTSD comes feelings of estrangement from others, loss of satisfaction in previously satisfying activities, and the feeling of hopelessness about the future. It is no wonder then, that veterans suffer a higher risk of suicide. This bill, H.R. 327, is an important step in the right direction to ending the soldiers' stigma for seeking help, and gives hope to thousands of veterans and their families coping with the costs of war.

Like H.R. 327, The Veterans Vision Equity Act (H.R. 797), is intended to providing our patriots with the care they deserve. H.R. 797 would change current law to provide veterans who receive disability compensation because of blindness in one eye, additional benefits if they are visually impaired in the second eye. This bill provides only a small change to the current code,

yet it would aid an estimated 13,200 veterans in getting proper compensation for their disability. We blessed with vision often take our sight for granted, but the loss of one's sight no doubt requires an altering of lifestyle. Indeed, the sights that once filled eyes with beauty are regulated to memories and perceived only in the imagination. Many of our veterans are coping with such a change, and this bill is important in supporting their transition.

Finally there is H.R. 1284, The Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2007. This bill would provide an increase in the rate of compensation for disabled veterans, as well as provide an increase in rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for these veterans' families. The baby-boom generation understands why this bill is necessary: costs are going up. When I was young five dollars could buy you dinner and take you to the movies—now it can buy you a can of soda and chips. Indeed, inflation is slowly but surely driving up costs for basic goods and services. It is important that we meet our obligations to our veterans by providing them with benefits commensurate to their service. H.R. 1284 would achieve just that.

We are a nation at war. As such, now more than ever, maintaining the well-being of our veterans is paramount. Already, we have asked for so much from our service men and women, and now it is time that we return the favor. I hope my colleagues will join me in supporting our troops and vote "yes" on H.R. 327, H.R. 797 and H.R. 1284.

Mr. FILNER. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. MILLER of Florida. Mr. Speaker, we yield back the balance of our time.